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Review by: Alan Wolfe
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Review Essay

Native Son

Samuel Huntington Defends the Homeland

Alan Wolfe

Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity. BY SAMUEL P. HUNTINGTON. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004, 448 pp. $27.00.

In the course of a remarkably distinguished academic career, Samuel Huntington has demonstrated a steadfast commitment to realism. Distaste for sentimentality is certainly on display in his best-known book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (which originated as an article in this magazine before its publication in 1996). It has also been characteristic of his analysis of U.S. domestic politics. The heroes of *The Soldier and the State*, his 1964 book on civil-military relations, are neo-Hamiltonians such as Secretary of State Elihu Root and the naval strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan, members of "the first important American social group," as he describes them, "whose political philosophy more or less consciously borrowed and incorporated elements of the professional military ethic." In *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (1981), Huntington identifies four moments of "creedal passion" in American history: the Revolutionary era, the ages of Jacksonianism and Progressivism, and the 1960s. During these periods, he argues, Americans' unrealistic expectation of moral perfectibility prevented their leaders from doing the right thing. Throughout his career, Huntington has rejected ideology in favor of down-to-earth practicality, drawing cries of protest from critics, mostly on the left, who accuse him of cold-minded moral indifference and complicity with the powers that be.

Few subjects call out for Huntington's realism as much as immigration does. Since the 1965 Immigration Act, which

ALAN WOLFE is Director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College and author of *The Transformation of American Religion.*

effectively abolished quotas on immigrants from Europe, the United States has experienced one of the largest migrations of foreigners to its shores since its founding; nonwhite people whose first language is not English now make up a greater percentage of the U.S. population than at any other time in history. And although some writers treat this dramatic change with Panglossian optimism, the challenges are in fact staggering: bilingualism, dual citizenship, religious diversity, and multiculturalism place increasingly tough demands on U.S. culture and politics. If the United States tries to prevent immigrants from coming, it risks breaking its promise of freedom to the oppressed. But if it admits everyone who wants to come, it risks losing its distinctly American ideals—including the creed that holds out the promise of freedom and opportunity in the first place.

Who Are We?, Huntington's new book on the subject, offers dollops of the clear thinking that has characterized his work in the past. He rightly points out that post-1965 immigration from Mexico is different from earlier waves: the sending country is close by, the numbers are much larger, the areas to which migrants are attracted already have large Mexican-American populations, and there is no indication that the movement is likely to stop. And he offers a tough-minded evaluation of the tradeoffs that immigration involves, insisting, for example, that bilingualism can stand in the way of immigrants' success and that dual citizenship is problematic when so few Americans fulfill even the obligations of single citizenship. Huntington also convincingly demonstrates that ordinary Americans are more nationalistic than liberal elites: if a referendum were held today, a majority would support strong and effective enforcement of borders and stringent tests for citizenship. Glib, politically correct talk finds no place in Huntington's analysis, and for that readers should be grateful.

But at the same time, *Who Are We?* breaks with Huntington's previous work in significant, and often quite disturbing, ways. Gone is the realism that characterizes most of his writing: *Who Are We?* is riddled with the same kind of moralistic passion—at times bordering on hysteria—that Huntington finds so troubling in *American Politics*. He treats American elites with a contemptuous disdain that cannot be found in the more respectful *The Soldier and the State* and praises for their insight the same ordinary Americans that he has portrayed as attracted to hopeless moral crusades in his previous work. He eschews realistic treatment of American history in favor of romantic nostalgia for Anglo-Protestant culture. And then there is the book's fatalism: Huntington tells his readers that he is a "patriot ... deeply concerned about the unity and strength of my country based on liberty, equality, law and individual rights," but he portrays the United States as haplessly without resources in its struggle with immigration, as if the country's identity were too fragile for the challenges it faces. Although Huntington was deeply troubled by the 1960s and their aftermath, he managed to maintain his cool in subsequent books. Immigration has touched his nerves in a way that flower children and protesters never did. *Who Are We?* is Patrick Buchanan with footnotes.

FOUNDING MYTHS

Huntington believes that there is a core American identity, shaped by dissenting

Anglo-Protestantism. In the past, all immigrants (the first Americans, he points out, were settlers, not immigrants) were willing to subscribe to this identity. But among those arriving today, according to Huntington, are many who refuse to share—and even denounce as criminal—America's cultural identity. He warns that, unless the United States insists that they accept it, which is unlikely given the global priorities of business and the multicultural fantasies of liberal elites, "the United States of America will suffer the fate of Sparta, Rome, and other human communities."

Each of those propositions, however, is exaggerated. Applying a Huntingtonian sense of dispassion to them yields a far more optimistic view of how the United States can not only survive immigration, but flourish as a result.

It is, first of all, incorrect to claim that American identity was shaped by dissenting Anglo-Protestantism. Two of the churches prominent at the United States' founding were established rather than dissenting: the Church of England became the established church of Virginia under the Episcopal name, and Presbyterianism had been established in Scotland. To be sure, the Puritans had been a dissenting sect in England, but they became an established church in Massachusetts. New York and New Jersey, meanwhile, were populated largely by Dutch settlers; Catholics were a powerful force in Maryland; Rhode Island was founded by Baptists (many of whom had British roots but followed a sect with German origins); and Germans and British Quakers were prominent in Pennsylvania.

To claim that there exists a common "Anglo-Protestant culture" also ignores the fact that Protestants have disagreed vehemently with each other over what that culture is. Dissenting Protestants, not all that prominent at the American founding, shaped the Second Great Awakening of the 1820s and 1830s. In doing so, however, they had to rebel against the creedal orthodoxies of the more established Calvinist churches. They rejected the idea that salvation was strictly in the hands of an arbitrary and capricious God—violating, as it does, every principle of American democratic individualism—in favor of an evangelical sympathy for Arminianism, which held that individuals could play a role in their own salvation. There really is no such thing as the Protestant religion; there are many Protestant sects whose ideas on everything from scriptural authority to the role of the liturgy are in conflict. If religion shapes identity, the United States has had many identities because it has had so many religions. Huntington knows all of these things; his command of American religious history is impressive. He just never incorporates them into his argument.

It is true that non-Protestant immigrants in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to accept many aspects of Protestant worship: all American religions, even Catholicism and Judaism, eventually become congregational ones. But Huntington fails to appreciate the degree to which immigrants shaped American culture even as they assimilated. Catholicism was already the largest Christian denomination in the United States by the second half of the nineteenth century, and its distinctive ethos changed the way Americans celebrate Easter, attend school, play sports, and conduct foreign policy. American Jews adapted their faith to American culture, but the paradigmatic embodiment of

American culture, the motion picture, was from its early days shaped by a distinctly Jewish sensibility.

Huntington's contention that recent immigrants are more hostile to the American tradition of assimilation than those who came before them is similarly flawed. He reviews evidence that Mexicans, the largest immigrant group, are not as well educated as others, are less likely to apply for citizenship, and do not intermarry as frequently. Yet contrary to popular opinion, Mexican-Americans acquire English in ways similar to previous immigrants and, according to at least one important measure of assimilation— conversion to evangelical Protestantism—are likely ahead of all other immigrant groups except Koreans. Huntington's claims that Mexican immigration will result in "the demographic *reconquista* of areas Americans took from Mexico by force in the 1830s and 1840s" and that immigrants may try to reconnect Southwestern states to Mexico are not only incendiary, they have little basis in fact.

PATRIOT GAMES

Only one of Huntington's points withstands the test of empirical reality: ordinary Americans are more likely to be patriotic and nationalistic than are liberal elites. This finding, however, undermines Huntington's argument for the importance of Anglo-Protestant culture.

Huntington believes, on the one hand, that there are too many recent immigrants and, on the other hand, that ordinary Americans are more patriotic than elites. Both cannot be true: with such a large number of immigrants in the general population, the patriotic mass of ordinary Americans must surely include many immigrants.

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Huntington's own data affirm this. Eighty-one percent of non-Hispanic whites say that they are willing to fight for their country, whereas the figure among immigrants is 75 percent—not all that different. (Another poll he reviews actually shows that more Hispanic parents than white parents agreed with the statement "The United States is a better country than most other countries in the world.") Of the 525 U.S. fatalities in Iraq as of early February 2004, four were named Perez (Hector, Joel, Jose, and Wilfredo). By my rough count, 64 of the 525 possessed Hispanic surnames. This is 12 percent of the total, exactly equal to the percentage of the U.S. population that is Hispanic. One of them, Jose Gutierrez, an orphan, came to the United States at the age of 14 by train, foot, and bus and was granted posthumous citizenship by the U.S. government. Like countless immigrants before him, he assimilated by dying in defense of the society he worked so hard to reach. Indeed, recent immigrants to the United States are more patriotic toward their new home than long-settled Britons toward the United Kingdom, French toward France, or Germans toward Germany. Other countries would be delighted to have immigrants with such assimilationist sympathies.

Huntington's claims about the importance of Anglo-Protestant culture are similarly undermined by the empirical fact that elites are less nationalistic than are ordinary Americans. Global-oriented businessmen and multiculturalist academics do tend to look upon old-fashioned patriotism with cosmopolitan disdain. But it is precisely those groups that include disproportionately large numbers of the Anglo-Protestants whose culture Huntington wants to celebrate. The most unabashedly antiwar of the Democratic Party's major 2004 presidential candidates, Howard Dean, had the most impeccable WASP background. Boston, where Huntington lives, is filled with descendants of the Puritans who vote for Ralph Nader, drink French wine, speak foreign languages, and rarely, if ever, send their children to die in places like Iraq.

THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Fortunately, it is not necessary to defend anything like a core culture to insist on the importance of assimilation; a core creed will suffice. A national culture is a way of life defined by one ethnic group or race, which demands that everyone else adapt to it. But a national creed is simply a set of ideas about what the United States should be—and is thus open to all, regardless of faith, ethnicity, or race. Creedal identity has been central to the greatness of the United States, allowing it to recharge its batteries by incorporating new immigrant groups at those times when Anglo-Protestant cultural elites were turning reactionary and defensive. Perhaps the best example of such cultural reaction is Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, published in 1916, which used pseudo-science and hysteria-mongering to fuel a nativist movement about which few contemporary Americans can be proud.

Had *Who Are We?* focused on the crisis facing the American creed as a result of recent immigration, it could have gone on to address concrete steps to ensure its viability. But what can one do to strengthen a culture in crisis? Huntington says he is making "an argument for the importance of Anglo-Protestant culture, not for the importance of Anglo-Protestant people."

Culture can and does change, he points out, and it is perfectly reasonable to ask people without Anglo-Protestant roots to adapt their culture to the one that has existed here from the beginning. Yet Huntington suggests nothing about how this can be done, perhaps because so little can be done by any one person. Of course he is right that culture changes. But it happens over long periods of time, as a result of collective action, not just individual initiative. A new immigrant can immediately adopt the American creed, but the only thing he can do to adopt American culture is set in motion a process that, at best, will benefit his grandchildren (and even that will happen only if many other immigrants do so with him).

Because culture is more resistant than creed, Huntington ends on a note of relentless pessimism. To his credit, he avoids the racist pseudo-science of *The Passing of the Great Race*. He does not, unfortunately, avoid its nativism. "The term 'nativism' has acquired pejorative connotations among denationalized elites," Huntington writes. In his view, nativism ought not be defined by extremist militias and the Ku Klux Klan but rather should be embraced by those who fear that an internal immigrant minority is on its way to becoming a majority. Summarizing his main findings, Huntington concludes that "white nativist movements are a possible and plausible response to these trends, and in situations of serious economic downturn and hardship could be highly probable." The word "plausible" catches the eye. To say that something is possible or probable is to make a prediction; to call it plausible is to endorse it.

Immigration poses endless dilemmas, and there is no way of knowing whether the success of past immigrants in adopting the American creed will be replicated by immigrants today. But insisting on creedal rather than cultural assimilation at least gives them a chance, which they certainly need. There is rising opposition to immigration among ordinary Americans and, if Huntington is any indication, among academic observers as well. The cause of creedal assimilation is not well served by a thoughtless and insipid cultural relativism that makes no demands on those who make the United States their home. The one thing required to navigate this difficult terrain is leadership—and that is precisely where Huntington's latest book proves most disappointing.

In his earlier work, Huntington showed with remarkable perspicacity the ways in which elites have been unable to escape popular illusions in order to do what is in the national interest. In *Who Are We?*, the brave defender of leadership turns himself into a populist, claiming that the defensive instincts of ordinary Americans make more sense than the out-of-touch cosmopolitanism of elites. He was right in *The Soldier and the State* and *American Politics* and is wrong in *Who Are We?* Ordinary Americans are unlikely to become as nativist as Huntington fears. But even if they do, immigration is here to say. A realist would urge American leaders to find sensible ways to deal with that fact.